

Japan Christian Activity News

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EMMANUEL:

Sharing the Wonder in Christmas

by Aiko CARTER

The experience of the shepherds out in the fields, described in the Christmas story, appropriately expresses the Christmas message reaching Japan. The good news of great joy produced simple awe and amazement -- the Bible records that, "all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them."

To the Japanese mind it is certainly strange for God to become a living person in history and to be called Emmanuel. In the Japanese value system, reaching the status of a god and being worshipped as "kami" means being above this world, not in it. Under feudalism, shrines and temples recognized the people's hope for freedom from their rigid social frame of reference.

Within the rice culture, people went together in a community unit to worship the gods. Maintaining mutually interdependent relationships in the closed community was the first priority. But with psychological exclusiveness heightened, curiosity about the unknown world outside was intensified. Thus, the story of the Christ-birth is surely a wonder in Japan.

Today in Japan Pointing at a brightly decorated cake in a bakery show-window, a little girl pleads with her mother, and the mother replies, "Let's buy it for Home Eve." That's what many Japanese call the night of Dec. 24, when confectionary stores across the country push harder than at any other time to sell decorated cakes. The message of Christmas came into Japan in combination with the external European and American traditions: Christmas trees, cakes, music, gift exchange. The foreign forms were taken into the indigenous culture, the story of Christmas reduced to its romantic symbolism and separated from the central meaning of Christian faith. The wonder became a wonderful collage, form without soul.

One of the most crowded streets in Tokyo has large, brilliantly reflective crosses on the lamp posts. A Christmas tree in a kindergarten room was decked with signs advocating clean politics on the occasion of the recent Diet elections. So often the uses of Christmas symbols are emptied of their real meaning, but at least this is an indication that people are opening their minds to this unknown world, and turning what was unfamiliar to them into something familiar. The process may even widen understanding, and a merry atmosphere bring people together in a vision of hope for humankind which does not die away like fireworks in the night sky.

The Spirit Lives And true Christmas wonder is in evidence. From 1906 the Salvation Army has hung kettles on the streets and brought Christmas to many homeless people through its Christmas crusade. This year again the month-long campaign began Dec. 1. It comes to a close Dec. 30 on the west side

MORE

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of Shinjuku Station in Tokyo, where the Salvation Army joins with groups from Aoyama Gakuin University and local children in a special Christmas caroling night.

On Christmas Day 30 Kyodan (United Church of Christ) churches in Tokyo's southern wards will hold a two-hour afternoon program at a large public hall, inviting over 1000 neighborhood people to share the joy of fellowship in the real meaning of Christmas. Not only will the Christmas offering be shared with needy families in the community, but the committee has also set a goal of sharing the joy of Christmas with other brothers and sisters in Asia.

At Christmastime in the many valleys among the concrete buildings, people who have seen the babe in the manger are taking responsibility for spreading the good news of Emmanuel through their involvement in the world, much as did the shepherds 2000 years ago. A wonderful wonder, indeed.

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A New Community

JAPAN, KOREA CHURCH LEADERS MEET

The Japan-Korea consultation reported in the following article occurred before the International Consultation on National Security, Human Rights and Peace reported in our last issue. --eds.

Eighteen Japanese participants have returned from attending the third Japan-Korea Church Consultation. As a result of month-long negotiations between NCC-Japan General Secretary John NAKAJIMA, three leaders of the Korean Christian Church in Japan, and Ambassador KIM Yong Sun of the South Korean Embassy in Tokyo; as well as between NCC-Korea General Secretary KIM Kwan Suk, chairman Paul C. LEE and government officials in Seoul, visas were granted to all Japanese participants late Saturday afternoon, Nov. 20 -- barely in time for their plane Monday morning to the meeting at Seoul's Christian Academy.

At Seoul's Kimpo Airport, the 18 were greeted first by a government official who led them through immigration. At Academy House, among the first materials they received -- from the ROK government -- were full-length books on the Korean economy and selected speeches by President PARK Chung Hee. Vice-Minister KIM Dong Whie of the Ministry of Culture and Information feted all participants at a steak dinner, and the director of the seventh bureau of the KCIA hosted an expensive Korean dinner for selected participants.

Such was the atmosphere surrounding the consultation on "Mission and History - Asian Suffering and Hope." These externals, however, had little effect on what the church representatives did and said. After the exchange of greetings by the chairpersons of both NCCs, the consultation began with a review session. Both general secretaries introduced changes in the historical situations of their countries since the first (1973) and second (1974) consultations.

Major presentations were made by four leaders. Dr. YOO Dong Shik of Yonsei University reviewed Korean church history. He likened the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) to the Babylonian captivity, and the period after 1945 to Exodus. The church's mission is to create new humanity in Christ. This new humanity, by building a new community, participates in the formation of history. Moses' Exodus was not without hardships. So also the Korean churches even after liberation encounter hardships and sufferings. The promised land may not be in sight yet, but it is there nonetheless.

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Prof. ISHIDA Yoshiro of Lutheran Seminary in Tokyo dealt with his view of mission in history. Mission should not be regarded as a propaganda activity. It takes place in sharing the event of God's graceful care in history. It consequently calls for solidarity with one's neighbors -- other churches and peoples of other lands. The church must read the signs of the times in history and live in that world together with other (non-Christian) people.

Prof. SHIN Bok Ryond of Kunkook University provoked lively discussion especially among Korean participants. He coldly criticized Korean Christians for what he called detaching themselves from the Korean people's nationalism. The church on the whole has only been interested in itself. The oft-cited incidents of Christian nationalism during Japanese rule cannot be interpreted as the expression of true nationalism on the part of Korean Christians, but emerged merely out of self-preservation. Representing the younger generation, he demanded: "Don't hand over to us the hatred you older people cultivated between the peoples of Korea and Japan." Neighboring nations are bound to be suspicious of each other. Don't live in illusion that both our countries can be friendly. In this reality, we should live with our teeth firmly clenched, he concluded. All Koreans who spoke afterwards did not share his view.

Prof. OGAWA Keiji of Tokyo Women's College introduced Karl Barth's interpretation of conscience, which should be understood in the context of Christian eschatology. Whether one has true hope given by God or not determines whether one has true conscience or not. Such conscience functions most effectively in "waiting" and "hastening" (II Peter 3:12). "Waiting" avoids absolutizing of the present phenomenon. "Hastening" gives motivation not to be content with the status quo.

Added to these presentations were well-prepared Bible studies by Prof. MOON Hee Suk and Prof. SATAKE Akira. In two groups, one on theological bases and another on practical tasks, the participants deepened their understandings. In the joint declaration they stated that the Christian mission should neither ignore traditional culture as irrelevant to the gospel nor become enmeshed in it to the extent that mission loses its critical transcendence. "The mission of the Gospel, by entering into the people's concrete situation as a transcendent universal questioning of traditional culture, can break open the closed character of such culture and give birth to a more open, enriched and creative life."

The statement listed concrete issues which both churches would deal with in the coming years. Among them: the problems of Korean residents in Japan, exchange of peoples from a variety of groups, and studies on Japanese economic penetration in Korea. It also expressed deep concern for the fate of those Christian leaders who are undergoing trials in relation to the Mar. 1 Declaration of National Democratic Salvation and pleaded for the restoration of their human rights. A spirit of mutual friendship was present throughout the whole conference, as compared to the previous consultations where Christians from both countries met in tension. The consultation was no longer a group playing catch with mutual differences, but began to form into a real team, aiming for a touchdown.

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THANK YOU to all JCAN readers who have responded to our appeal for gift subscriptions. So far, we have received five gift subscriptions. These will go to individuals and organizations in Asian countries who are very interested in receiving JCAN but are unable to easily send foreign currency out of their countries. Also, JCAN subscription rates are a relatively heavy burden compared with other items on their budgets, given the reality of the economic imbalance between Japan and the rest of Asia.

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TSU CITY UPDATE

Decision Close at Hand

Shinto priests, Christians and other interested citizens spent a long December night on the road in front of the huge new Supreme Court building anxious to be among the 161 observers allowed to attend the final hearing of the Tsu-Jichinsai case on December 8.

The plaintiff, SEKIGUCHI Seichi, had charged the ex-mayor of Tsu City with mis-using public money for a religious ceremony (see JCAP #506, Nov. 19). This case, important in the legal establishment of freedom of thought and religion in Japan, is supported mostly by local Shinto priests on the ex-mayor's side and by many Christian citizens on Sekiguchi's side.

The mayor's lawyers based their defense on the following points:

1. The Jichinsai is not a definite religious activity, but merely a ceremony which is connected with the customs of Japan.
2. The custom is very traditional. Many other nations such as the USA, with separation of church and state constitutionally guaranteed, follow similar traditions.
3. No citizen was compelled to take part in the ceremony against his or her will.
4. The financial loss was so small that a majority of the citizens would willingly allow it.

These points made the appellee and his supporters seem a very narrow-minded minority who lack generosity. To refute this, Sekiguchi's lawyers presented a powerful rebuttal. They referred to pre-war persecution in Japan of various religious groups whose beliefs conflicted with national security, and urged clarification of the definition of religion under the Japanese constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court has also recently moved towards protecting the rights of religious minorities, one lawyer pointed out.

Following the final session, supporters from outside Tokyo told of their impressions. "I am very disappointed at the argument of the mayor's lawyers," said a Shinto priest from Suzuka Shrine who supports Sekiguchi. "It makes our Shintoism less valuable to get special protection. As a supporter of the present democratic constitution, I prefer to evangelize Shintoism by telling about it," the priest added, "although Shinto is called the religion without words."

Sekiguchi smiled in response to the trial saying, "I have been called stubborn and narrow-minded, but I believe we should be stubborn to protect freedom of thought." The final decision of the court is expected early next spring.

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Coffee and Compromise

COUNCIL OF COOPERATION GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Tension, anger, and working-through dominated the 65th Council of Cooperation General Assembly, held at the Japan Christian Center on Dec. 3.

Some delegates started to walk out after a self-styled "participant observer" took the floor and refused to leave when asked. Motions to discontinue the assembly, however, were countered by assembly moderator Rev. TODA Isuke, who judiciously interjected lunch and coffee breaks to ease the tension. A representative from the Korean church was instrumental in preventing break-up of the meeting, as were some attending missionaries.

The COC consists of the United Church of Christ in Japan, the Christian Schools'

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Council, the Christian Social Work League, and the Japan-North American Commission on Cooperative Mission (formerly the IBC). A major question for the group at this time is the meaning and function of the COC and how it can contribute to mutuality in mission in Japan and North America. However, participants at the assembly had little opportunity to address the central issue, spending most of their energy instead on handling tensions within the COC.

The assembly chose FUSE Hideo, director of the social work center Kyouikan, as acting general secretary for the next two years. He is the first layman to be elected to the post. He replaces Rev. SAEKI Yoichiro, who served for four years and eight months. (See JCAN #507, Dec. 10, p.3). Reports of the four constituent bodies and the 1977 budgets, 1978 COC budgets and cooperative funds were accepted.

The meeting closed with a modicum of harmony. However, there had been no time for full discussion of personnel policy statements and other general cooperative mission relationships between Japan and North America.

ICONS TO JAPAN

Tokyo dwellers recently had a rare opportunity to appreciate -- and purchase -- some prize examples of one of Christendom's most impressive art genres: the Greek and Russian Orthodox icon. Mitsukoshi, one of Japan's most prestigious department stores, joined with the art dealer Gekkoso to sponsor the exhibit, "What is the icon?" Nov. 30 to Dec. 13.

Covering the 10th through the 19th centuries, the exhibition included more than 200 painted works and about 50 pieces of metalwork, mostly crucifixes. Because the works came from individual collections and a number of churches, rather than from a single museum's collection, Mitsukoshi took three and a half years to prepare for the two-week exhibit.

Were there any special bureaucratic problems in taking an exhibit of this nature out of the Soviet Union? Difficulties do arise, an exhibit official agreed. Here Mitsukoshi's experience in handling several other Russian art exhibits over the years undoubtedly helped smooth the way.

All of the works were available for sale, with pricetags to match their artistic and historic value. One tag -- in the "medium-price" range --- read ¥2,880,000 (US \$9,600).

Displaying religious art so as to accomodate both the faithful and the irreligious is not always easy. Though Mitsukoshi officials admitted that they valued the icons more artistically than religiously, the works were generally displayed in a manner respectful of their religious significance. All were mounted within glass cases on a dark red velvet background. If the icon had not had a frame, it was not framed like a picture for the exhibit. A large number were displayed in individual arched recessions set in a free-standing white wall, effecting more the atmosphere of a church than a museum. All works were accompanied by cards giving title, historic period, and some explanation of geographic location, basis in Scripture or life of a saint, or use of the icon.

Timing the exhibition to coincide with Christmas, Mitsukoshi had seen to it that an icon of Saint Nicolas was included.

-- Jim TREECE

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RINGING IN THE SEASON -- The Japan Guild of English Handbell Choirs was formally organized in Tokyo Nov. 20, 1976, and that afternoon over 1000 guests gathered to hear member choirs perform at the First Tokyo Handbell Festival at Aoyama Gakuin.

Merle I. Kelly, a Kyodan missionary sent to Japan by the Presbyterian Church of the United States, was elected honorary chairman of the Japan Guild. He directs the Kinjo Gakuin handbell choirs.

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CLIPPINGS FROM THE JAPANESE PRESS

compiled by C. KORIYAMA

WHEELCHAIRS ON THE BUSES--Since the first of December, Kawasaki, a city neighboring Tokyo, has forbidden open wheelchairs on city buses. Those confined to wheelchairs feel they are safer in their chairs than on a narrow and unfamiliar bus seat, but this violates safety regulations established by the bus company.

On Dec. 12 two wheelchair-bound women, members of a Kawasaki self-help organization for cerebral palsy victims, were waiting at a bus-stop along with five supporters. The bus driver refused to let them board in their chairs, and controversy ensued. Bus passengers and local police became involved. Tempers flared. The bus didn't move. After two and a half hours, several passengers helped the women board through the narrow passenger entrance and set up their wheelchairs inside the bus, but the driver still refused to start. To force some action by the bus company, the original seven plus three sympathizing passengers occupied the dark and unheated bus all night.

"Of course handicapped persons should be able to get out and around. But it is also natural to consider the bus company regulations and the convenience of the other passengers. Accommodating both sides necessitates remodeling the buses, and that means either higher fares for passengers or national and government subsidies," a transportation specialist observed. A difficult problem.

(Yomiuri Shimbun)

CHILDREN ON THE PHONE--Everything from the weather report to shopping information is available on the phone these days, including pornographic stories. Advertised through men's magazines, the "pink phone" unlisted numbers are available to subscribers for under ¥2000 a month. Everyone assumed the callers were unmarried working men and students studying for university examinations, but recently mothers have been shocked to find their grade school children also listening in on the "pink phone" line.

Children, most of them between 7 and 11 years old, pick up the numbers from their friends at school. The most frequent callers are children at home alone because both parents are working, police say. Concerned juvenile officials have even recorded and analyzed the "pink phone" narratives, but found the vocabulary just ambiguous enough to circumvent anti-pornography regulations.

"Children are becoming interested in sex at an earlier age," the police assert. But the comment of a grade school principal, that "children at home alone get lonely," may be closer to the truth. The friendly female voice on the "pink phone" may be just that to children....a friendly voice.

(Mainichi Shimbun)

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*Merry Christmas and
A Happy New Year!!*



JCAN Staff